



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION 8**

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JAN 28 2014

Ref: 8EPR-N

BLM/FS Greater Sage Grouse EIS
Attn: Quincy Bahr
440 West 200 South, Suite 500
Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1345

Re: Utah Greater Sage-Grouse Draft EIS # 20130310

Dear Mr. Bahr:

In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 8 (EPA) has reviewed the Utah Greater Sage-Grouse Draft Land Use Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement (Draft LUPA/EIS) prepared by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS).

Background

In March 2010, United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published its listing decision for Greater Sage Grouse (GRSG) as "warranted but precluded." Inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms was identified as a major threat to GRSG in the USFWS findings on the petition to list the species under the Endangered Species Act. The Draft LUPA/EIS analyzes the effects of amending up to 14 BLM resource management plans (RMPs) and six USFS land and resource management plans (LRMPs). The planning area considered in this Draft LUPA/EIS includes all lands in the State of Utah, with the exception of Washington and San Juan counties (which do not include GRSG habitat) and portions of the Sawtooth National Forest located in Box Elder County (which is being considered in the Idaho-Montana Sub-region planning process). Portions of the Ashley and Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forests that extend into the State of Wyoming are also included.

The Draft LUPA/EIS identifies two categories of GRSG habitat: preliminary priority management areas (PPMAs) and preliminary general management areas (PGMAs). Actions within PPMAs are analyzed to conserve and improve GRSG habitat functionality while actions within PGMAs are analyzed to provide for major life history function (e.g., breeding, migration, or winter survival) needed for sustainable GRSG populations. All mapped occupied Utah GRSG habitat has been placed into 15 GRSG population areas, which total approximately 11.5 million acres.

Five alternatives are analyzed in the Draft LUPA/EIS, including the no action alternative. Alternative D is the BLM and the USFS Preferred Alternative. This alternative emphasizes balancing resources and resources use and is designed to address local ecological site variability.

EPA's Comments and Recommendations

1. GRSG Habitat Identification

The Draft LUPA/EIS states that the BLM, USFS, USFWS, and the State of Utah have not reached agreement on which lands have the highest conservation value or which lands are necessary to maintain or increase GRSG populations in the planning area. While the document identifies PPMA and PGMA, which generally follow the boundaries of preliminary priority habitat and preliminary general habitat, respectively, it is not clear how or when these areas will be updated during or following the LUPA process. Appendix N – Greater Sage Grouse Habitat Baseline indicates intent to update GRSG habitat areas, but does not indicate when such updates will occur or how the information will be used. We recommend that the Final LUPA/EIS describe the process by which priority and general management area designations could change over time and the criteria or circumstances that would be part of that process. Further, we recommend that the document explain how management decisions determined through the LUPA process will apply in newly designated PPMA or PGMA as they are refined in the future. With the many conservation activities that are proposed or are underway on both federal and private land, we recommend that the selected alternative include some flexibility to allow additional or different lands to be designated as PPMA or PGMA. For example, if conservation measures such as habitat restoration or road closures are successful in expanding the priority habitat, it would be useful for BLM and the USFS to be able to expand the GRSG protections to lands that are not currently designated as PPMA without having to formally modify the RMPs/LRMPs.

2. Alternatives Analysis -- Relative Protectiveness of GRSG Populations

We recommend that the final LUPA/EIS add a section to compare the anticipated outcomes of each alternative in protecting GRSG populations long-term. Section 4.2 -*Environmental Consequences - Greater Sage Grouse* in the Draft LUPA/EIS considers three indicators of impacts on GRSG: habitat loss, habitat degradation, and disruption (which includes the likelihood of impacts on survival or reproduction due to direct or indirect effects), and includes the assumption that analysis of impacts on GRSG habitats also incorporates the indirect impacts on GRSG. Section 4.2 also incorporates relevant scientific studies of how activities are likely to affect sage grouse behavior and whether management actions will be effective at reducing or minimizing impacts. Despite the clear intent in the Draft LUPA/EIS to consider the impacts on GRSG populations, the discussion in the Draft EIS primarily focuses on habitat impacts and the resulting direct and indirect impacts on GRSG populations are not clearly presented. Further, the summary of environmental consequences in Table 2.4 compares impacts of the alternatives on sage grouse habitat; however, the document does not include a summary of how the alternatives compare in protecting sage grouse populations and if the actions in the proposed alternatives are likely to be sufficient to sustain Utah populations of the species. We understand that it would not be possible to have a definitive, quantitative discussion on the future of GRSG in Utah for the many reasons discussed in the draft LUPA/EIS. However, a qualitative summary would add an important component to the decision-making process and improve the public's ability to understand the expected outcomes of the alternatives. We recommend that the summary indicate whether GRSG populations in the 15 population areas are likely to be stable, increasing, or decreasing under the four action alternatives, and compare this condition to the current condition of the 15 population areas discussed in Section 3.2.

3. Alternatives and Adaptive Management

We support the commitment of the BLM and the USFS to develop an adaptive management strategy “to provide certainty that unintended negative impacts on GRSG will be addressed before consequences become severe or irreversible.” For the reasons discussed in Section 2.3 of the Draft LUPA/EIS, such a strategy will be critical to the success of the management actions determined through the LUPA process. As such, we recommend that the adaptive management strategy be included in the Final LUPA/EIS.

We additionally recommend that the BLM consider selecting a more precautionary alternative and using adaptive management to relax the conservation measures as sage grouse populations increase or achieve sustainability. This precautionary approach to adaptive management planning appears to be worth considering because of the slowness of the GRSG to move into expanded or improved habitat and the unpredictability of GRSG populations. It is not clear whether adaptive management would be successful in increasing the protection of GRSG habitat once the land management practices and decisions have been made. Many of the land management practices and decisions covered by the LUPA/EIS would result in permanent impacts with few opportunities to reduce habitat fragmentation. For example, once a new road is constructed there would be permanent impacts to grouse habitat. It may be possible to seasonally close the road to reduce impacts; however, many of the road impacts, such as habitat fragmentation, would remain permanently. Incorporating GRSG-specific management considerations into the initial management approach may provide greater benefit to GRSG even for activities with less permanent impacts. For example, according to Section 4.2.5 of the Draft LUPA/EIS, grazing management under the Preferred Alternative would begin with current practices, and would be adaptively managed over time to meet Rangeland Health Standards and GRSG habitat objectives. The document states that this could result in some habitat areas being reduced in quality for a period of time before impacts are assessed and grazing adjustments are implemented, but it does not clearly identify how long it may take for impacts to GRSG populations to be mitigated.

4. Climate Change Impacts

According to the Draft LUPA/EIS, it appears that climate change will generally have a moderate impact on GRSG habitat, but some population areas are likely to experience noticeable (high to very high) impacts. The full impact of climate change on GRSG habitat and populations is difficult to determine from the information presented in the document, due to missing information and inconsistent methodologies for assessing potential impact. We recommend that the predictions of potential climate change for the Colorado Plateau Ecoregion and Central Basin and Range Ecoregion in Tables 3.5 and 3.6, respectively, be modified in the Final LUPA/EIS to use a consistent methodology so that comparisons of impacts across the Utah sub-region are apparent. Similarly, we recommend reconciling the methodologies used to report potential climate change impacts to GRSG habitat in Tables 3.7 and 3.8. Finally, we recommend that the Final LUPA/EIS provide additional information on if and when climate change information will be available for the Northern Great Basin, Wyoming Basin, and Wasatch and Uinta Mountains Ecoregions.

5. Sagebrush ACECs/Zoological Areas

Under Alternative C, 15 new BLM Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) and USFS Zoological Areas would be designated to protect sagebrush and GRSG habitat. As the Draft LUPA/EIS identifies, management within these areas would focus on reducing anthropogenic surface disturbances and removal of unneeded infrastructure (page 4-74). None of the other alternatives consider new

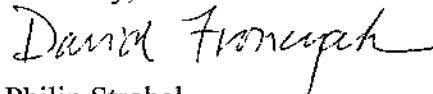
ACECs/Zoological Areas to protect GRSG. We recommend that the BLM and the USFS consider whether any of the proposed ACECs/Zoological Areas, or portions of them, warrant incorporation into the Preferred Alternative. For example, certain areas may have particularly undisturbed and valuable sagebrush habitat or may protect a vulnerable GRSG population.

The EPA's Rating

Based on our review, the EPA is rating the Draft LUPA/EIS Preferred Alternative as "Environmental Concerns – Insufficient Information" (EC-2). The "EC" rating means that the EPA's review has identified potential impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. It is not clear from the analysis if the Preferred Alternative is sufficiently protective to increase and/or maintain sustainable GRSG populations. The "2" rating means that the Draft LUPA/EIS does not contain sufficient information for the EPA to fully assess environmental impacts. A description of EPA's rating system can be found at: <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/nepa/comments/ratings.html>.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this document and hope our suggestions for improving it will assist you with preparation of the Final LUPA/EIS. We would be happy to meet to discuss these comments and our recommendations. If you have any questions or requests, please feel free to contact either me at 303-312-6704 or Molly Vaughan of my staff at 303-312-6577 or by email at vaughan.molly@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

for 

Philip Strobel

Acting Director, NEPA Compliance and Review Program
Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation